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ABSTRACT

While research usually emphasizes the decrements of older persons, increases in human relations skills may be among the observable gains of aging. The present study, conducted in the Counseling Center of the Andrus Gerontology Center, evaluates the potential of using older volunteers as peer counselors. Subjects were 11 persons from a larger pool of older adult volunteers who were enrolled in a counselor training program. A control group of 11 other volunteers was chosen randomly from the remaining group. The experimental group received 10 training sessions in counseling skills based on Carkhuff's developmental model, with modifications to include information on the aging process. All Ss were evaluated prior to and following the training course in a mock interview. Responses were rated on the dimensions of empathy, genuineness and non-possessive warmth, which have been found to be related to effective counseling. Results show that older adults can be trained in the kind of interpersonal skills needed for counseling, extending the previous data in the training of lay counselors into the training of older persons. (Author)

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THE USE OF OLDER VOLUNTEERS AS PEER-COUNSELORS

A paper presented at the 29th Annual Meeting of the Gerontological Society

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This study addresses two problems: the lack of meaningful social roles for many older persons and the inadequate provision of counseling services to those over 65. A feasible and economically sound option is the training and utilization of older adults as peer-counselors.

Many attempts have been made in training lay personnel in the dimensions of accurate empathy, nonpossessive warmth and genuineness. These dimensions have been related in previous research to a variety of indexes of constructive client outcome. (Rogers, 1962; Truax, 1963; Truax and Carkhuff, 1963; Rogers, Gendlm, Kiesler and Truax, 1967; Truax and Carkhuff, 1967; Truax and Mitchell, 1968) In another study, Truax, Carkhuff and Kodman (1965) found significant personality changes on the MMPI in patients receiving high levels of these therapeutic conditions.

It has been demonstrated that these conditions can be taught to non-professionals. Truax and Carkhuff (1967) have research instruments to measure these conditions and have developed a training program for persons with little or no background of training in psychotherapy. Lay persons who had received a 100 hour training acquired a level of effectiveness in the therapeutic condition equal to that of experienced professional therapists.

These findings have been extended to the training of college students as peer counselors (Wyrick and Mitchell, 1969; Wagner and Mitchell, 1969). Volunteers also have been used extensively in school settings (Cowen, 1968). More recently, Arthur, Donnan and Lair (1973) used college student volunteers to act as companions to institutionalized elderly patients. As is evident, most of the lay counselors in the studies were either personnel working in hospitals or college students. To this date, little has been done using older adult volunteers. However, evidence of their effectiveness can be inferred from the success of the Foster Grand Parents Program (Saltz, 1971).

This study was conducted to test the feasibility of training and utilizing older volunteers as peer-counselors.

It was hypothetized that as a result of a training program in the therapeutic conditions of accurate empathy, nonpossessive warmth and genuineness, the older volunteers' level of these conditions would increase compared to a control group receiving no training.

METHOD

Subjects

The subjects were older adult volunteers of the Andrus Gerontology Center of the University of Southern California who volunteered to participate in the study. No previous specialized training and/or academic achievement as such was

a criterion for acceptance of the older adults into the training program. Interviews were given to determine their interests in helping others, their ability to problem solve and their willingness to listen with warmth and empathy as well as to learn.

The experimental group consisted of 11 older adults with an age range of 61 to 79 and a mean age of 67.3. The control group, also drawn from the same larger pool of volunteers, comprised six older adults with an age range of 64 to 75 and a mean age of 69.3. (Of 11 controls who started the study, 5 were never post-tested due to illness (1), vacation (2) and move outside the state (2)).

Procedures

The training program, modeled on Carkhuff's training program for lay counselors, comprised ten one-and-one half hour sessions over a ten-week period. Two components were stressed: one involving the learning and practicing of the counseling skills defined as accurate empathy, non-possessive warmth and genuineness; the other, stressing the basic process of aging in order to free the peer-counselors from stereotypic and mythological thinking about the behavior and needs of older persons. In addition, a weekly sensitivity training session of one-and one-half-hour was given. Participants could use the sensitivity training as supervision, although the focus was kept as much as possible on sensitivity training.

To test the peer-courselors' level of the therapeutic conditions,a video tape of five male client's statements and five female client's statements was made. Upon listening and viewing five of these statements, subjects responded to each statement as they would a client. No time limit was required in responding and the responses were tape recorded for later rating.

The tape recorded responses were made before and after the training program. The tapes were blind rated by nine raters enrolled in a Marriage and Family Counseling Program who had been trained in the rating of the therapeutic conditions.

The rating scales were those of Truax who devised them for rating the perceiving and responding of trainees functioning primarily as counselors.

The nine raters were divided into groups of three, each group rating one condition. The raters' coefficient of interjudge reliability was high for empathy and warmth and somewhat lower for genuineness. The range between the pairs of raters within each group was: .962 to .969 for empathy, .937 to .960 for warmth and .637 to .750 for genuineness.

In addition pre-post test measures of the subjects' attitude toward self and others were taken, using a modified form of the Berger scale (1912). This scale was used to

test any change in the subject's attitude toward self and others as a result of the training program and to test for a possible screening device for selecting future trainees.

RESULTS

There was no significant difference in starting between the experimental and the control group in the level of therapeutic conditions; but, as it was hypothetized the experimental group showed a greater pre- post-test difference in accurate empathy and non possessive warmth than the control. The difference was significant in accurate empathy at the .025 level using the Mann-Whitney U test and in warmth at the .05 level.

The pre- post-test difference of the experimental group vs the control group for genuineness was not significant.

See TABLE 1.

TABLE 1: Changes in Accurate Empathy, Non Possessive Warmth and Genuineness of Experimental / Control Group.

	N	Pretest	Posttest	Mann-Whitney U performed on change scores
Accurate Empathy				
Experimental	11	2.33	3.04	15.5*
Control	6	2.36	2.13	
Non Possesive Warmth				
Experimental	11	2.17	3.04	13**
Control	6	1.90	1.91	
Genuineness				
Experimental	11	3.13	3.14	28.5
Control	6	2.96	2.86	

* Significant at .05 level, one-tailed test.
** Significant at .025 level, one-tailed test.

Furthermore, it was hypothetized that a positive movement would be recorded on the Berger Scale in attitude toward self and others. This was not confirmed.

Subsequent correlations were run on the experimental group only, using the Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient between pre-test scores in attitude toward self and others and pre- post-test difference in empathy, warmth and genuineness. A significant correlation was found between the acceptance of others pre-test and the pre- post-test difference in empathy and warmth. In addition, the pre-post-test difference in acceptance of self correlated with the pre- post-test difference in empathy and warmth.

See TABLE 2.

TABLE 2: Correlations
(Experimental Group Only)

	Acceptance Others Pre-test	△ AO	Acceptance Self Pre-test	△ AS
△ Empathy	0.57*	0.41	0.31	0.57*
△ Warmth	0.58*	0.36	0.49	0.63*
△ Genuineness	-0.06	0.57*	-0.08	0.23

* Correlation significant at .05 level using the Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient.

DISCUSSION

These results indicate that older adults can be trained in the kind of interpersonal skills needed for counseling, extending the previous data in the training of lay counselors into the training of older persons.

Furthermore, the older adults acquired these skills at a level related to both client's self-exploration and client's improvement. A score of 3.00 is considered to be minimally facilitative. (Truax and Carkhuff, 1967)

However, the experimental group genuineness level did not move to a statisfically significant degree. Yet, their level of genuineness was such that it would be considered as a positive condition in a counseling interaction. The shortness of the client's statements and the contrived atmosphere of the testing might have been influencial factors in their lack of movement in genuineness. The raters themselves had a hard time deciding upon the level of genuineness of each response; a fact reflected by the relative lowness of the interjudge reliability in genuineness.

The results on the Berger scale showed a move toward a more accepting attitude toward self and others but not to a statistically significant degree. However, in view of the correlation between acceptance of others pre-test and the pre- post-test difference in empathy and warmth, the Berger scale could be used as a predictive

device to screen prospective peer-counselors.

The pre-post test difference in empathy and warmth correlated also with the pre-post test difference in attitude toward self indicating that perhaps as the subjects became more empathic and warm they extended these qualities to themselves and were able to be more accepting of their own person.

The implications of the findings are important to the future social position of retired people. At the present, the aged are suffering from a loss of social roles. Rosow (1967) related the "rolelessness" of the aged to self-esteem. In giving the aged new roles in which to feel useful and to grow would, as this study points out, increase their self-esteem. Albrecht (1951) correlated high ratings in social interaction to good adjustment and added that many of the problems of aging could be prevented if suitable roles were available to older people.

The peer-counselors in this study are now staffing the Andrus Adult Counseling Center under the supervision of graduate students and clinical psychologists, making it possible to extend the services of the Counseling Center to a greater number of clients. Further research will determine the effectiveness of these trained peer-counselors in actual counseling sessions.

In conclusion this study tested for the first time the feasibility of training and using older adults as peer-counselors. It also pointed toward the perceptual change taking place within an older adult going through such a training program.

The trainees became more accepting not only of other people but more significantly of themselves, thus reversing the negative societal acceptance of aging. The positive gain in viewing themselves and others could lead toward a greater sense of fulfillment in the latter years. Finally, the use of older adults as peer-counselors would provide them with new roles and would increase the mental health personnel qualified to serve the elderly.

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